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CALIFORNIA NATURAL RESOURCES AGENCY • DEPARTMENT OF FISH AND GAME • U.S. ARMY CORPS OF ENGINEERS



Background of the Species Conservation Habitat Project

The Quantitative Settlement Agreement implementing legislation formally acknowledged the State of California's intent to undertake the restoration of the Salton Sea. The California Natural Resources Agency was required to develop an ecosystem restoration program for the Salton Sea.

After a very long and publicly transparent process, the Salton Sea Ecosystem Restoration Program Preferred Alternative Report and Funding Plan were presented to the California State Legislature by the California Secretary of Natural Resources in May 2007.

To date, the Legislature has not acted on the preferred alternative for the Salton Sea Restoration; however, it has appropriated funding to begin work on the Species Conservation Habitat (SCH) Project.

The State has begun the environmental analysis and engineering design of the SCH project, consistent with the "early start" habitat recommendations of the Salton Sea Ecosystem Restoration Programmatic (PEIR). The California Natural Resources Agency is serving as the lead agency for compliance with the California Environmental Quality Act (CEQA).

The need for California to implement the SCH project is driven by the environmental problems that exist within the watershed – problems that are quickly reaching crisis levels.

As a result of naturally occurring processes that will be exacerbated by reduced inflows

after 2017, the Salton Sea's salinity levels continue to increase and are expected to exceed the tolerance of most fish species in the sea by 2018. These fish are critical to support many fish-eating birds that are dependent on the Salton Sea.

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SCH State and Federal Environmental Process Underway

EIS/EIR Scoping

One could say that the official gun has sounded to start the environmental review process for the SCH Project. That is, on June 21, 2010 the State of California and the Army Corps of Engineers formally released and published the Notice of Intent (NOI)/Notice of Preparation (NOP) of a draft Environmental Impact Statement (EIS) and Environmental Impact Report (EIR). These notices put in motion the thirty-day EIS/EIR scoping process. The scoping process is required by the California Environmental Quality Act (CEQA) and the National Environmental Policy Act (NEPA) and provides the public the opportunity to comment on the scope of the environmental review. The Federal NEPA process is being coordinated by the United States Army Corps of Engineers. The State of California

CEQA process is being led by the California Department of Fish and Game on behalf of the Natural Resource Agency. Both agencies are working in a fully coordinated effort in which both the State and Federal environmental reviews happen simultaneously.

Among the key elements of the NOP and the NOI are the Project Purpose and Goals and Objectives. They are outlined below along with information on how to provide scoping comments to the lead agencies.

Project Purpose

The SCH Project is being developed as a conservation measure for the protection of the fish and wildlife species dependent on the Salton Sea in accordance with California Fish and Game Code, Section 2932. As the Sea recedes and becomes more saline, fish

species will not be able to survive. Simultaneously, the fish-eating birds, including several species of special concern, will lose their forage base and begin to disappear. As the Sea continues to become more saline, current invertebrate species will become less diverse and be replaced by species tolerant of hyper-saline environments (e.g., brine flies and brine shrimp).

The SCH Project would provide habitat for both fish and invertebrate species, which in turn would provide forage for the numerous bird species dependent on the Salton Sea ecosystem. Salinity would be managed to support various assemblages of invertebrates and fish to diversify the prey base for as wide a variety of bird species as possible.

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Background of the Species Conservation Habitat Project
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The Salton Sea is a key stop-over point on one of North America’s most important flyways. The loss of fish in the Salton Sea will dramatically reduce the available food for these birds, including the American White Pelican, the Black Skimmer, the Caspian Tern and the Double-Crested Cormorant. These birds will begin to disappear as the food becomes scarcer.



The Natural Resources Agency will proceed with the SCH project only after completion of a full and open public process that will include working with all of the Salton Sea Stakeholders.

Desert Pupfish Rescue

After several years of providing data for USGS scientists, the Experimental Ponds at the south end of the Salton Sea were slated for de-commissioning in July 2010. The ponds were scheduled to be drained, as per an agreement between the Bureau of Reclamation, (the agency which funded the ponds’ construction and operations) and the US Fish and Wildlife Service, and thousands of desert pupfish that unexpectedly made their homes in the ponds would soon be homeless. The Department of Fish and Game manages the wild and captive desert pupfish populations in California, and was the logical choice to design and implement salvage operations for this endangered fish. Efforts began in earnest in mid-July, as pumps were shut off and the ponds began to dry down.



By the time the operation was completed, over a million pupfish were salvaged and transported to nearby habitats and managed refugia. Such an undeniably successful outcome could not have been possible without the generous contribution of people and supplies from the Bureau of Reclamation, Imperial Irrigation District, Salton Sea Sonny Bono National Wildlife Refuge, and Agrarian Research and Management. Kudos and thanks are in order to all who were involved.

SCH State and Federal Environmental Process Underway
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Goals and Objectives

Goal 1

Objectives

Develop a range of aquatic habitats that will support fish and wildlife species dependent on the Salton Sea

Provide appropriate foraging habitat for piscivorous (fish-eating) bird species

Develop habitats required to support piscivorous bird species

Support a sustainable, productive aquatic community

Provide suitable water quality for fish

Minimize adverse effects on desert pupfish

Minimize selenium ecorisk

Minimize risk of avian and fish disease

Goal 2

Objectives

Develop and refine information needed to successfully manage the SCH Project habitat through an adaptive management process

Identify uncertainties in achieving the objectives

Design science-based means to test alternatives and reduce uncertainty

Develop and implement a monitoring plan

Develop a decision-making framework

Provide proof of concept for future restoration

Four public scoping meetings were held July 7 and 8, 2010 in Palm Desert, Thermal, Calipatria and Brawley and scoping comments were received.

If you would like to review the NOI/NOP and the information that was presented at the scoping meetings go to our website www.saltionsea.water.ca.gov



What are the SCH Alternatives? What will SCH do?

Many stakeholders and interested parties have asked these questions as we have begun to talk about the SCH Project.

First, “What are the SCH alternatives?” The environmental review process requires that a reasonable range of alternatives be studied prior to the selection of a project design. Previous analyses, including the PEIR, have identified some design concepts that we know will be helpful in shaping these alternatives. The SCH Project is currently expected to include approximately 2,400 acres of shallow ponds ranging from 100 to 500 acres

each. The actual total project size may vary depending on the outcome of the alternatives development process. Alternatives initially being considered include: (a) alternative locations (at the confluence of the New, Alamo, or Whitewater rivers and the Salton Sea, or a combination of sites); (b) different acreages of created habitat; (c) different pond sizes and configurations; (d) different ranges of salinity; and (e) no project. The range and characteristics of the alternatives addressed in the EIS/EIR will be further developed based on input from the scoping process and special studies that are underway.

Second, “What will SCH do?” There are several important benefits that the SCH Project will provide and problems at the Salton Sea it will help address.

A successful SCH project will begin to turn around what can only be described as a losing game – it will support productive fish and invertebrate populations, it will provide a sustainable forage base for numerous bird species, and it will create habitat to enhance foraging, nesting, and roosting opportunities for birds. And as an ancillary benefit, by constructing ponds on exposed playa, the SCH Project will help to improve the air quality by reducing dust emissions.



San Francisco Bay ponds similar to ponds envisioned for SCH



Salton Sea Financial Assistance Program

The Natural Resources Agency, in conjunction with the Department of Fish and Game and the Department of Water Resources, is developing a Financial Assistance Program for Salton Sea projects that will be up and running by mid 2011. The program, which is patterned after the Cal FED and Fisheries Grant programs, is intended to move funds to the local level for worthy projects.

profit organizations or governmental agencies, and their applications must be consistent with the Salton Sea Restoration Act. In order to qualify and be considered, all applicants must have completed their environmental compliance and must have received all required permits.

All applications will be subject to an administrative review to ensure they meet the base criteria, followed by both a technical and scientific review by a panel of experts. The result of these reviews will be given to a selection panel that will make the final decision on awarding funding.

Two types of applications are being sought – 1) habitat restoration and 2) research projects. The applicants must be either non-

Additionally, due to the fact that these are state funds, CEQA compliance will be required. There will be a pre-established review and selection process for all applications.

If you have a project that meets the criteria above, we encourage you to apply for the Salton Sea Financial Assistance program when the Proposal Solicitation package is finalized by mid 2011.

Upcoming Stakeholder and Public Meetings

We are pleased to announce that there will be additional Stakeholder and public meetings on the SCH Project as the process moves forward. If you haven’t been to one of the meetings yet, don’t worry – the process is only beginning.

We anticipate that more public meetings will be held in the Salton Sea region late this year or early next year upon release of the Draft EIS/EIR when more detailed information is available for your review and comment.

If you received this Salton Sea Update, you will receive notification of future public meetings.

If you are not on our email list, go to our website and sign up to receive information electronically www.saltionsea.water.ca.gov.